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A Response to Barry W. Rosen's "Metamärchen: Reevaluating and Defining the Romantic Kunstmärchen"

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I very much enjoyed Mr. Rosen's article on German "Metamärchen" in **Forum** 18:1. There is little doubt in my mind that the authors involved chose to foreground particular stylistic and formal aspects of the **Märchen** genre in these works, thus commenting on the form itself. However, I have several other comments about other parts of the essay which I think pertinent.

First, Mr. Rosen spends several pages utilizing Max Lüthi's description of Volksmärchen (one-dimensionality, abstract style, linearity of plot, etc.) and contrasting the literary qualities of three Kunstmärchen to these qualities of Volksmärchen. In essence, Rosen indicates that the literary tales are more complex, coherent, and contain characters with greater psychological depth. As a result of this comparison, the Volksmärchen appear as appealing as a poor swineherd. Rosen admits, however, the "inherent bias here since we are judging oral literature using formal categories from written literature. The differences in the media often prevent a fair comparison; ultimately, written and oral categories have more in common than previously suspected" (21). I agree with

Rosen that there is an inherent bias in comparing two media with categories from only the one (literature). Lüthi's works seem more sensitive to this problem by generally restricting the scope of his work to description of Volksmärchen or comparison of works within that medium. Rosen's essay at least invites, if not implies, a conclusion that Kunstmärchen are better (more complex, coherent, etc.) than oral tales. Another method of avoiding this bias is by considering categories from both media. For instance, Betsy Bowden considers the range of rhetorical use Bob Dylan displays in performing his own music in her **Performed Literature** (1984). Thus, oral performance characteristics are considered as evaluative criteria. Mr. Rosen seems less than ready to admit that the stylistic choices in a (literary) performance can serve to hinder as well as to help. For instance, just as the tales described here by Brentano and Hoffman are Metamärchen, so too are tales by Dickens, Thackeray, and Andrew Lang. Moving beyond England, the same is true for many of the tales in the **Cabinet des Fees**. But much the same fate has befallen most of these secondary narratives (commentaries upon the popular genre of a particular period). Unlike the timeless Märchen, which have persisted at least in numerous literary variants, the number of Metamärchen which remain of interest today is very small. Most of the Metamärchen by the authors cited above survive because of their place in literary history or children's literature (ironically, since one wonders just how many children can appreciate all of the allusions, parody, and character depth - not to mention length - of such Metamärchen), not literary studies per se. As a result, the Volksmärchen's plot linearity, simple characters, and abstract style may serve as quite an advantage in persisting through generations compared to fully fleshed-out literary works.

As for the "inherent differences" between written (literary) tales and oral (folk) tales, I should like to suggest one other possibility. Literary critics such as Jonathan Culler (1976) have suggested for at least a decade that readers approach a printed text with certain expectations. Thus, one person can "read"

in more than one way. When a text appears in the same form of (and usually described as) literature, readers approach it with specific expectations (unity, coherence, significance). Thus, while the words may be printed in a variety of physical forms, it becomes the act of recognition and decision by a reader that the text is "literary," which leads to a reading with literary qualities. In light of this theory, I should wonder if the reason we don't find complexity and significance in a text, whether it occurs in a different medium such as oral folktales or it occurs in an innovative blend of genres, such as Jean Toomer's **Cane**, is simply because we are not looking for it.

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